DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 143 029 CS 203 577

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TITLE The Teaching of Composition through Textless Books.
PUB DATE [77]
NOTE 5p.; Paper prepared at University of Houston

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Composition Skills (Literary); Creative Writing; Descriptive Writing; *English Instruction; *Instructional Materials; Secondary Education; *Teaching Techniques; *Writing Exercises
IDENTIFIERS *Picture Books; *Trade Books

ABSTRACT

This document outlines an approach to secondary school composition instruction, using wordless picture books. Specific published textless books are discussed as aids in stimulating imagination, tapping the need for sense impressions, developing sequences of events, teaching transition and the passage of time, demonstrating point of view, making use of adjectives and modifiers, and exploring characterization. (Author/AA)

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THE TEACHING OF COMPOSITION THROUGH TEXTLESS BOOKS

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English teachers are forever searching for new methods, techniques, or gimmicks to turn their students on to writing and the composing process. As a secondary English teacher in charge of many of the composition classes, I too began the frantic search for something that would serve as an imagination jogger as well as a vehicle I could use for instructional purposes in teaching writing. With the help of some elementary teachers and children's literature experts, I have found another successful teaching device which I would like to share and add to the growing number of workable approaches available to teachers of composition in the high schools today. The use of textless children's books in the high school composition class seems to me a workable vehicle through which students can learn to write and learn to enjoy the writing process.

To begin with, I hesitate to categorize all those wordless picture books designed for the preschooler as children's books. As you will see later in this article, we do these books an injustice to limit them to this preschool age group. These books have appeal for anyone with imagination.

Textless books provide the teacher with the perfect opportunity for individualizing instruction. When a student is given a set of interrelated pictures, as in textless books, and asked to conjure up his own story based on these pictures, the teacher begins to approach the ultimate in individualization by tapping that particular student's own imagination. There is a good deal of talk today about individual response to literature. It is this individual response to a picture book that we are looking for with textless books. As

teachers, we speak of student independence as one of the ultimate goals of language arts, and yet we proceed to shackle the student with our own words and rules or with those of a recognized authority. Textless books let the student throw off the shackles of other people's words and deal with his own responses.

In many high schools today, creative writing and composition are two separate classes. Textless books work for both classes as any good writing instructional device should. The list of books that follows includes suggestions for implementation in both the beginning composition courses as well as in the advanced courses of creative writing, if such a distinction is necessary. The books are not in any special order, and the same book might be very well incorporated into several different units of the same course.

A sure-fire hit as an imagination jogger is Mitsumasa Anno's Topsy-Turvies: Pictures to Stretch the Imagination. This is a fine book to use in getting students to free their imaginations. The pictures are weird enough to defy one single interpretation. In fact, the author writes, "In other words, I have purposely added no words to these topsy-turvy pictures of mine so that you can make them mean whatever you want them to mean."

In a somewhat similar vein is a book by Fernando Krahn entitled Journeys of Sebastian. The book first shows a child looking at an object in real life. Next the object is shown in the child's mind and begins changing with that child's imagination. Offshoots of these two books might be discussions concerning imagination, fear, and differences in imagination at different age levels. Writing assignments such as keeping a dream diary and recreating favorite childhood fantasies are workable exercises.

Iela and Enzo Mari's book The Apple and the Moth is the pictorial study of the life cycle of a moth. The book has great potential when teaching sequence

of event, passage of time, and transition in writing. On another level it has implications for teaching reincarnation and might be used for discussions about man's control over his own destiny.

Similar to The Apple and the Moth is Martha Alexander's Out! Out! Out! A bird enters the home of a little boy and pandemonium begins as the adults try to capture the bird and send it back out the window. Again, the book illustrates sequence of event and transition. It also has potential when discussing and writing humor. Characterization developed by action of the character abounds in this book; therefore, it proves valuable when teaching character development and short story writing.

The Magic Balloon, also by Mari, follows a balloon as it changes shape with each new thing it touches. This book is most effective when teaching students the power adjectives and other modifiers have on the nouns they precede. Exercises here include giving students a list of nouns and asking them to note changes as they describe the nouns with different modifiers.

Hand in hand with the power of words is the age old problem of wordiness in writing. Perhaps the most excellent textless book illustrating utter simplicity and yet maintaining depth of thought is The Winner by Kjell Ringi. In this story, two people meet. Each one in turn disguises himself from the other. With the disguises come fear and with fear comes weapons to defend themselves against one another. Each weapon increases in size until the ultimate weapon devours both people. The artist's use of small simple characters set against a large white page cannot help but emphasize the needlessness of extra words. Composition topics resulting from this story seem endless.

A similar use of simplicity is seen in Alfred Olschewski's Winterbird. Black and white drawings create the story of a bird walking on snow trying to flee from a cat. Thousands of birds come to the aid of their distressed friend

and the cat flees. Simplicity of expression, strength through unity, and friendship are possible topics with this book.

When setting and mood are the topics in class, Guillermo Mordillo's The Damp and Daffy Doings of a Daring Pirate Ship is an excellent choice. The use of color to set mood is a triumph in this book. The artist creates an almost three-dimensional effect using colors. This book even has a moral at the end. Assignments here might involve rewriting a fable or writing a modern fable emphasizing moral, setting, and mood.

Point of view is best shown in Yutika Sugita's My Friend Little John and Me. What makes this story of a boy and dog so different is that it is told from the dog's point of view. Through the use of the eyes, the artist successfully conveys the feelings of the dog. This is a most important book when trying to get students to recognize point of view and to get them to attempt writing from a different point of view. Simplicity is also a virtue of this book.

Finally, a book entitled Changes, Changes by Pat Hutchins illustrates a topic that is popular with composition teachers. Using the same shapes throughout the story, the artist places the shapes in different positions to create new objects. The composing process is certainly analogous here. Each student has the necessary words, but it is up to him to use his imagination to create the new objects.

I hope that English teachers will never give up the search for new workable approaches to teaching composition. Textless books offer a unique approach to the teaching of writing. They capitalize on individual response and imagination. These books lend themselves to both structured and unstructured methods of teaching composition. Fernendo Krahn, in his introduction to the Journeys of Sebastian, says, "Thinking is when you go exploring in your head." Textless books help students to start this exploration and to write it down as they go along.